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## THE MATRON OF EPHEBUS: AN IDENTIFICATION

*by Allen Cabaniss*

**I**F ONE FORGETS most of the particularities of the "matron of Ephesus" tale as related by Phaedrus and Petronius,<sup>1</sup> he discovers a narrative divided roughly into three parts. The first is an account or description of a widow famed for her chastity and even called a virgin, but who is ultimately seduced by a soldier. The second is a gruesome story of a substituted body replacing one stolen from a cross and thereby saving the soldier from punishment. The third and last is a brief statement concerning the notoriety of the event and the reaction of people to it.

When reduced to this bare and generalized outline, the Latin versions are remarkably reminiscent of a similar outline of the Christian gospels and the Acts of the Apostles! There, too, are the same three divisions: a virgin who gives birth to a child and becomes an object of suspicion; a crucified body offered for others; and a sequel describing results of the account. Could the Phaedrian-Petronian story be a parody on the Christian theme? The dates of the Latin writers coincide with the days of Christ's ministry and the early years of the church. Petronius had spent some time in eastern Mediterranean lands. And the usual contemptuous pagan attitude toward Christianity would have encouraged them to poke fun at the new religion. It is therefore entirely within the realm of possibility that the Latin story bears some relationship to Christian preaching, thought, and incipient literature.

There remains the question of probability. Hardly had the Christian mission been inaugurated when there arose in many minds

doubts and on many lips sneers and jibes about the virgin birth. Some of them are embedded in the Gospel texts and even more in apocryphal legends.<sup>2</sup> The crucifixion of Christ and the doctrine of the atonement are the most prominent features of Christianity and both would and did attract far more attention than the dogma of the virgin birth. The pages of the New Testament ring with this complex of doctrines and would certainly provoke heathen comment. The well-known Palatine *graffito* (the crucified creature with horse's head and the inscription, "Alexamenos worships his god"), whatever its exact date, is evidence that the comic muse was early at work on this central aspect of the Christian religion. That there should be a sequel, some kind of statement of reaction, requires no special attention.

In the course of the second century A.D. there were published in Greek two notable satires on the Christian story, namely, the *Death of Peregrinus* by Lucian of Samosata (ca. 170) and the *True Discourse* by Celsus (ca. 178).<sup>3</sup> The former is not so striking in detail, but the satire is obvious. Peregrinus is definitely compared with Christ (sec. 11) and is at length immolated dramatically (sec. 36). Lucian wrote another book, a dialogue called *The Runaways*, which recounts the consequences of the death of Peregrinus.<sup>4</sup> In these two writings we have as it were a Gospel and Acts of Peregrinus.

The work by Celsus is far more significant and circumstantial. Here was an outstanding attack in great detail. Jesus is portrayed as the offspring of an adulterous union of a poor Jewish country woman (I, xxviii) and a soldier named Panthera (I, xxxii). The reality of His death and resurrection is lengthily challenged and the reaction to His life, death, and presumed resurrection is questioned (Book II). The entire refutation is moreover attributed to a Jew, whom Celsus has created as one of his chief protagonists.

<sup>1</sup>John P. Postgate, *Phaedri Fabulae Aesopiae cum Nicolai Perotti Prologo et Decem Novis Fabulis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919), *Appendix Perottina*, p. xiii; Evan T. Sage, *Petronius: The Satiricon* (New York: Century Co., 1929), pp. 95-98.

<sup>2</sup>See, e. g., John 8:41 and similar passages for canonical evidence, and the Protevangelium or Book of James for apocryphal evidence.

<sup>3</sup>An edition and translation of Lucian is found in the Loeb Classical Library in eight volumes. The passing of Peregrinus is presented in Vol. V (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 2-51. Celsus, *True Discourse*, is no longer extant, but most of it is known from its incorporation into Origen's reply, *Contra Celsum*, of which a convenient translation is given in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 395-669.

<sup>4</sup>See preceding Note. This particular writing is given on pp. 54-99.

The last point suggests that there was a Jewish version mocking or parodying the Gospel and Acts. This consideration lends credence to Hugh J. Schonfield's attempt to establish the antiquity of at least the nucleus of the *Toldoth Jeshu*.<sup>5</sup> In such a case, therefore, there was still another, a third, early parody, which in its original form or as an oral version may have antedated Lucian's stories and Celsus's attack or at the latest have been contemporaneous with them.

Since there were actual and known instances of parody of the Christian story, it is obvious that it is not only possible but indeed probable that there is some relationship between the "matron of Ephesus" tale and the Christian tradition. It has been twice elsewhere suggested that Petronius (and *ipso facto* Phaedrus) not only had some knowledge of Christian teaching, but did in fact make verbal use of it.<sup>6</sup> And it has already been intimated that the two Latin versions bear an over-all resemblance to the Christian gospel and that they are not related to folklore.<sup>7</sup> It is in consequence reasonable to suppose that the "matron" story is the earliest known parody of the Christian account, that it inaugurates in the literary sphere the mocking tradition which was followed by Lucian, Celsus, and the author of the *Toldoth Jeshu*, indeed even in the present day by William Faulkner in his *A Fable*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Hugh J. Schonfield, *According to the Hebrews* (London: Duckworth, 1937).

<sup>6</sup>Allen Cabaniss, "A Footnote to the 'Petronian Question'," *Classical Philology*, XLIX (April, 1954), 98-102; "The *Satiricon* and the Christian Oral Tradition," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, III (Winter, 1960), 36-39.

<sup>7</sup>Cabaniss, "The Matron of Ephesus Again: An Analysis," *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, II (1961), 41-53.

<sup>8</sup>Cabaniss, "Eine Quelle zu Faulkners 'Die Fabel'," *Schweizer Monatshefte*, Heft 9, 37 Jahr (December, 1957; Zurich), 820-822.